

Christchurch, Hitchin. 11th April 2021 10.45am

Call to Worship: Psalm 127: 1

Unless the Lord builds the house,
Its builders labour in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
The watchmen stand guard in vain.

Hymn (StF) 18 Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am God.
be still and know that I am God.
be still and know that I am God.

I am the Lord who saves and heals.
I am the Lord who saves and heals.
I am the Lord who saves and heals.

In you, O Lord, I put my trust.
In you, O Lord, I put my trust.
In you, O Lord, I put my trust.

Anonymous

Prayer of Adoration

Lord, you accept our doubts and embrace our questions
like a wise parent encouraging your children to express themselves;
hiding your hurt at our scepticism,
always hoping for the best and seeing our potential.
We worship and adore you for believing in us. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

We confess that we are so often judgemental of others.
In particular, we berate those who do not share our beliefs.
What need have they of proof? Why can't they just believe?
Yet we live in a world where little is taken at face value.
Fake news surrounds us, and the camera definitely does lie.
Therefore, Lord, forgive us when we look down upon the unbelievers, the doubters, the
ones who demand proof;
for this is the world in which we live,
and the world to which we must proclaim your truth.
There is no proof we can offer in these times,
except to show our belief in the ways in which we reach out,
by accepting and loving unconditionally,
by showing patience and forbearance to those who differ from us – or is it we who differ
from them?
Therefore, forgive us when we fail to reflect your truths in our daily lives, and let us become

testaments to your risen power.
May Christ be evident in us and in all that we do. **Amen.**

Hymn (StF) 309 See, what a morning
See, what a morning, gloriously bright,
with the dawning of hope in Jerusalem;
folded the graveclothes, tomb filled with light,
as the angels announce Christ is risen!
See God's salvation plan,
wrought in love, borne in pain, paid in sacrifice,
fulfilled in Christ, the Man,
for He lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

See Mary weeping, 'Where is He laid?'
as in sorrow she turns from the empty tomb;
hears a voice speaking, calling her name;
it's the Master, the Lord raised to life again!
The voice that spans the years,
speaking life, stirring hope, bringing peace to us,
will sound till he appears,
for he lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

One with the Father, Ancient of Days,
through the Spirit who clothes faith with certainty;
honour and blessing, glory and praise
to the King crowned with power and authority!
And we are raised with him,
death is dead, love has won, Christ has conquered;
and we shall reign with him,
for he lives: Christ is risen from the dead!

Stuart Townend (b. 1963) and Keith Getty (b. 1974)

Reading: John 20: 19-31 (NIV)

Jesus appears to his disciples

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

Jesus appears to Thomas

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!'

But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'

²⁸ Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

The purpose of John's gospel

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe ^[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Reflection: Reconciliation

My brother, sister and I share messages on WhatsApp every day. Nothing strange about that! About 35 years ago Pip decided, for a reason known only to himself, to break from our family. He kept himself to himself and we heard about his life from other members of his wife's family. He lost his wife, Ruth, to cancer nearly six years ago and his daughter, Emily, to cancer towards the end of last year. My sister sent condolences to him on social media and he responded. It was at Emily's funeral that he and I met again and we have been 'chatting' ever since. Once lockdown eases sufficiently the three of us will meet and share sibling love. So, after many, many years we are reconciled. But there are at least two processes in that reconciliation, firstly that Pip needed to reconcile in his own mind his perspective on life and the second was where he reconciled himself to us. Which comes first? I think for Pip it was reconciling within himself to allow a reconciliation between the three of us; in some situations, it could be the other way round. A decision was made many years ago which changed life's perspective; a decision has been made recently that changed life's perspective again.

Over a much shorter time span we read earlier of the relationship between Jesus and Thomas. Looking at this passage of scripture and the story of Thomas as 'the doubting one' gives a negative perspective; seeing it as a time of change and reconciliation for Thomas puts a positive perspective on events and helps us to see Thomas in a different light. The resurrection of Jesus took a huge amount of belief on behalf of the disciples, but Jesus' appearance, firstly to Mary, then to the disciples in the Upper Room was proof for them that his promise had come true, he is alive. Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them and so he has a perception of life, as it is. When Jesus returns to allow Thomas the opportunity to change his perception on life – he already has. In verse 25, Thomas says "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Thomas is the one disciple who has thought through the events of the seven days following the resurrection of Christ and has been reconciled to a wonderful declaration of Jesus as his Lord and his God. It took my brother 35 years to be reconciled to an understanding of sibling love, it took Thomas a week to be reconciled to his risen Lord!

This past year has been phenomenally difficult for many of us; lost lives, adjustments to working practices, shopping practices and relationships. Our lives have had to adjust to a different perspective. As we look at the Government's Roadmap, where tomorrow all retail outlets, libraries and community centres will be able to open again, we begin to feel that life might be moving back to something resembling how it was before March 2020. In five weeks, we could be looking at even more relaxation of the lockdown and in another five weeks, there could be no legal limits on social contact.

This period of transition will be difficult for many because, whether we like it or not, we are institutionalised, driven by our culture and context and over these last 12-15 months our culture and context has altered, we need to mentally and physically adjust. The longer we spend doing or being one thing, the more difficult it is to change to something different. For me, today is only the second time I have been *in* anywhere but a food shop or my own home for a long time! I am having to adjust and reconcile this change internally and then with others around me. Throughout the pandemic this relationship of ourselves to our place in society has been important for all, whether because of being a key worker, of a particular age, needing to shield or needing to pastorally minister to friends or family required a positive decision to do something or not do something, to be somewhere or not be somewhere and we have been changed because of it. These words may resonate with us: *"With God's permission the enemy has sent poison and deadly dung among us, and so I will pray to God that he may be gracious and preserve us. Then I will fumigate to purify the air, give and take medicine, and avoid places and persons where I am not needed in order that I may not abuse myself and that through me others may not be infected and inflamed with the result that I become the cause of their death through my negligence. If God wishes to take me, he will be able to find me. At least I have done what he gave me to do and am responsible neither for my own death nor for the death of others. But if my neighbour needs me, I shall avoid neither person nor place but feel free to visit and help him."* The language may sound a little archaic and it is because this is not a report from lockdown during this past year but a letter from Martin Luther in 1527 in relation to one of several plagues that he faced in his lifetime. The passage is quoted in Tom Wright's excellent book 'God and the Pandemic' where he spends theological time ensuring that we do not look back on COVID-19 seeking blame, but we see the opportunities that the pandemic has given us.

Luther's letter raises another question of reconciliation that is vital for us as we work through the next couple of months of transition, how do we reconcile with our wider community? Firstly, we need to reconcile within ourselves, as Thomas did in that week between Jesus' two appearances. As individuals we will all respond in a different way, but there will be a time when we reflect on who we are, what we have done during the time of the pandemic and how we are going to adjust to change that affects us. Secondly, we need to reconcile with others in our worshipping community, are there different approaches to worship that need to be addressed and agreed within the leadership? Who is going to lead the new initiatives? What can we offer and how can we encourage and support others who are finding the changes difficult in the transition?

Thirdly, we need a reconciliation between the worshipping community and the wider community. The initiatives to engage with those outside the church need to be revisited in the RoadMap transition and beyond to whatever the normal will be going forward. How can we help the wider community move from an enforced isolation to an appropriate

community which fosters respect for all, breaks down barriers of race, gender and faith and continues with many of the values shown during the lockdown period?

You have an opportunity whilst Val is on Sabbatical, not to work behind her back, but to prepare the way forward, looking at strengths and weaknesses in the worshipping community with respect to the wider community. The one person that is vital in this reconciliation is the same person who was responsible for Thomas' change of perspective and reconciliation – Jesus Christ. Having a true relationship with Christ, as Luther did all those years ago, will help us to engage with our inner self through this time of transition from lockdown, review our perspective on life as it is at present and how and where we might need to reconcile our connections with family, friends and the world. Amen.

Intercessions

Gracious and loving God, we continue to pray for all your created world that has been stricken by COVID-19. We thank you for the skill of scientists in isolating vaccines to combat the virus and we pray for a fair distribution across the world, especially to parts of the world most affected; we think of India and countries in South America. We pray for reconciliation in all places and for all people.

Healing and sacrificial God we pray for our health service and for all health services across the world for their skill and patience in caring for those who are recovering from the affects of the virus and for the need to minister to all those who are suffering from other ailments, disease and life-threatening infections. We pray for reconciliation of finances to enable the backlog of operations to be lessened and healthcare available to all.

Father, Mother God, enter our innermost soul and convict us of your love for all. Reconcile our hearts to accept all in community, to forgive those who have hurt us and accept each other for who we are and want to be.

Loving God we pray for wisdom when engaging with your community, help us in our support of those who are struggling during lockdown and move through the RoadMap to a place of new community and relationships. Help us to reconcile your love with the pain in the lives of others.

Lord, we pray for ourselves and our need to follow Christ, through the power of your Holy Spirit in all we do and say. Give us the humility of your Spirit to be reconciled to ourselves, reconciled to others and ready for whatever you would have us do and be. I pray especially for the help and assistance I have received this morning – from Tony, as our Bible reader, from our musicians Andy, Sue, Paul & Rob and our technician, John. My prayer goes to all who develop and deliver worship over the coming weeks and months as they honour God and reach congregations in whatever means is required. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Hymn (StF) 547 Beyond these walls of worship
Beyond these walls of worship
in the stress and joy of life,
can we offer you our bodies
as a living sacrifice?
Will we keep you at the centre
far beyond the Sunday call?
Will we turn to you,
be transformed by you;
still declare you God of all?

Beyond these walls of worship,
in the times of work and rest,
will we display your love for all
when our faith's put to the test?
When the people that surround us
deny that you are there,
will we display our faith in you –
in life, in praise, in prayer?

Beyond these walls of worship
may your Spirit strengthen us
to make the whole of life our worship
as we witness to your love.
From this hour in your presence
send us out now to proclaim
that we'll live our life as a sacrifice
to the glory of your name.

Ian Worsfold (b. 1974) and Paul Wood (b. 1967)

Blessing

[From the Methodist Prayer Handbook for this year, Day 11, a prayer from Jakob Böhme (1575 – 1624)]

Let your word be in our mouth, O Lord, your truth in our heart and your will in our mind. Let us think only what is good and discern your presence in all that we do. Let us at all times be alive to the promptings of your Holy Spirit; through Christ our Lord. Amen.